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## Spice Island

By Edward Hower

### INHERITANCE

By Indira Ganesan.

193 pp. New York:

Alfred A. Knopf. \$22.

Indira Ganesan made an impressive debut in 1990 with her first novel, "The Journey," which earned her a place as finalist for Granta's Best Young Novelist award. It poignantly evoked the lives of adolescents living on the fictional island of Pi -- "a chunk of India that is not quite India torn free to float in the Bay of Bengal" -- where much of her new novel, "Inheritance," is also set. Here children can negotiate the difficult passage from adulthood to adolescence. Westerners seeking refuge can play at being Indian, and respectable Indian women can escape the restrictions of traditional family life.

Pi, however, is no paradise for 15-year-old Sonil, Ganesan's inquisitive central character, who has come to the island "to get over a dragging spell of bronchitis" at her grandmother's house. Sonil's mother, Lakshmi, whom Sonil rarely sees, became a family outcast years earlier by refusing to behave with decorum after her young husband's death. She had affairs with an Indian filmmaker and an American photographer and lives much of her time on Pi. Sonil, frustrated and bewildered by her mother's rejection of her, is left to grow up with her eccentric, warmhearted aunts on the mainland.

This supporting cast, along with Sonil's wise grandmother and her wistful cousin Jani, provide her with companionship and a stable upbringing. She develops bold, poetic dreams of becoming an oceanographer. "I wanted to help colonize the oceans, build cities amid the mermaids, wear conch flowers in my hair, dangle sea horses from my ears." Ganesan describes Sonil's anxieties and ambitions with moving intensity.

Although Lakshmi often stays with Sonil in her grandmother's spacious compound, mother and daughter scarcely speak to each other. Sonil must fill in the huge gaps in their relationship created by maternal indifference. Perhaps, the girl speculates, her mother was once bewitched. "Some troupe of fanatics leading a cow wearing streamers and bells" she imagines, "must have told her she was not meant for a peaceful widowhood."

A well-drawn, mysterious

figure, Lakshmi reappears throughout the book to engage the reader's curiosity as well as Sonil's. The girl secretly inspects her mother's room, sniffs her perfume, both attracted and frightened by evidence of her mother's sexuality. In her rage, Sonil sees Lakshmi as a goddess "with multiple arms and multiple breasts, like the bizarre temple paintings one sees in remote villages, the kind that other children's mothers hurriedly wave their babies away from." When Sonil discovers that her father was American, she must confront her shame at being illegitimate, even as she fantasizes that her father may have died nobly, or may live as a cowboy in exotic, faraway Montana.

As we enter the middle third of the book, events begin to strain the reader's credulity. Ganesan introduces Richard, a 30-year-old American who has come to India in search of spiritual enlightenment and finds Sonil instead. He is such a wooden, two-dimensional figure that it's hard to believe that she can take him seriously. Richard's mother, who arrives with a group called "the Ladies Who Travel," is also a stock character, speaking in clichés: "I want to be on a different level, mingle with real people, get in touch with myself." A guru wearing a filthy leopard skin -- clearly a joke -- captivates Sonil with his drivel, and she falls passionately for Richard, whom she calls "my cupcake of happiness." Some sentimentality creeps into the writing. Following Richard's sudden departure, Ganesan's narrative powers return as she eloquently describes the nuances of family relationships and the rhythms of an Indian household, and Sonil struggles to recover from

her affair.

Now that she's had her own romantic encounter with a Westerner, she can understand the painful facts of her mother's life, and can view her with more compassion. In "The Inheritance," Ganesan has created an appealing young heroine whose determination and sensitivity win us over in the end.

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